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ABSTRACT

Researchers in the area of depression, aware that women are more likely than men to be depressed, have examined women's marital and employment status to explain this phenomenon. However, the meanings, perceptions, and situations encountered within marital and work roles also contribute to emotional distress. The traditional sex role explanation of depression is insufficient for full-time working mothers, because these women experience the most intense role conflict between work and family; therefore, clarification of their stress is valuable. Research on dual career marriages has generally investigated the mother and her conflicts, as well as the effects of mothering and work on her children or husband. Research about the father's role in dual career marriages is needed. An exploration of the husband's and the wife's roles in work and family spheres and the relationship of these roles to mental health is essential to understanding married women's greater susceptibility to depression. Only by defining the conditions and meanings of women's roles within the family, and the effect of their husbands' support, can a view of emotional distress that solely emphasizes women's internal conflicts be transcended. (Author/NRB)

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WOMEN AT WORK AND AT HOME: IMPLICATIONS FOR DEPRESSION AND MENTAL HEALTH

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As my colleagues in this symposium (Nissenbaum, Kendall) have shown, it is essential to delineate subdivisions of depression in order to unravel the complexities of the sex differences we find. It is equally crucial to explore the same findings as expressions of a broader problem that differentially affects women and men. The connection between external social experience and internal psychological experience is one that demands our attention in our efforts to understand women and depression.

Evidence for the female preponderance in mental illness (Gove and Tudor, 1973), depression (Weissman and Klerman, 1977; 1980), and suicide attempts (Bernard, 1972; Gove, 1976) has been extensive and well-documented. Research demonstrates that women are consistently more likely to be depressed than are men. This finding persists even after accounting for the possibilities that women experience more stressful life events or judge events as more problematic, and after controlling for the fact that women report depression and go to doctors more frequently than do men (Gove and Tudor, 1973; Weissman and Klerman, 1977). Further, (Bernard, 1972, Gove, 1972; 1972a; and Tudor, 1973, and Radloff, 1975) the higher overall rates of mental illness for women are accounted for by the higher rates of emotional distress for married women in particular. Similarly, rates of depression and suicide attempts are higher for married women than married men, and lower for never married women than for never married men. Married men are less depressed than unmarried men, but women do not benefit from marriage in the same way (Bernard, 1972;

Durkheim, 1951; Goldman and Ravid, 1980; Gove, 1972; Lester, 1979; Radloff, 1980).[1] Again, these findings specify the general point: the higher rates of mental illness and depression for women are accounted for by the higher rate of emotional distress for married women in particular.

Attemps to explain this epidemiological sex difference in the rates of emotional distress in general, and of depression, in particular[2], have been abundant (Arieti and Bemporad, 1978; Bart, 1971; Brown and Harris, 1978; Chesler, 1972; Gove, 1972a; Pearlin, 1975; Weissman and Klerman, 1977; 1980; Weissman and Paykel, 1974). Theories of female biology, learned helplessness, empty-nest syndrome and role loss, and dependency on male dominance offer clarification of this complex issue of women and depression (Rohrbaugh, 1979). Strikingly, this literature, regardless of sexist or feminist orientation, consistently emphasizes the traditional role of women as contributing to the incidence of depression in women, seeming to support Durkheim's determination that "in itself conjugal society is harmful to the woman" (1951, p. 189) and beneficial to the man.

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[1]These findings may appear to be explained by self-selection into marriage. The self-selection argument suggests that the healthiest, most competent women will not get married while the unstable, less educated women will, with the opposite pattern present for men. Gove (1972a; 1972b; and Tudor, 1973) thoroughly explores this selection argument and provides clear evidence in opposition to such an explanation. He demonstrates that divorced and widowed individuals show sex differences in mental illness similar to that of never married individuals. If self-selection accounted for the variance in rates of mental illness, one would expect these rates to be more similar to that of married people.

[2]It is confusing to speak of sex differences in mental illness if we assume an undifferentiated definition of psychiatric disorder. However, there is consistent evidence that women have higher rates of depressive

Nevertheless, it appears simplistic, albeit liberating, to suggest that it is the dependent, passive, nurturant role of women in society that is solely responsible for distress and dissatisfaction in women. For it is not just the role of women per se, or the role of women within the institution of marriage, but the broader and more complex role of women in society, as expressed within the family that seems to be most crucial to this sex difference. Although findings about working married women and nonworking married women and stress have inconsistent results, it appears that in most studies, working husbands have the best emotional well-being, traditional housewives the worst, and wives employed outside the home are in between (Gove and Geerkin, 1977). It seems, however, that it is not employment in itself that protects men from depression (Radloff, 1975). While it is generally found that both housewives and working wives are more depressed than their working husbands, and that depression is higher (Gove and Tudor, 1973) and self-esteem lower (Birnbaum, 1975) for housewives than for working wives, there is data that diverges sharply from this.

Pearlin (1975) has found no difference between working wives and housewives with regard to depression, indicating that the single factor of employment does not buffer women from depression. In fact, more recent studies emphasize the greater stress a working woman experiences, compared both to housewives and working husbands, due to the difficulties of breaking from traditional roles, sexism on the job in forms of harassment,

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symptomology, studies that measure overall rates of mental illness, as well as rates of depression in particular, are cited (Dohrenwend and Dohrenwend, 1976). This study's combined reference of emotional distress and depression is based on the same justification.

underpayment, or lack of support, and the expectations of being superwoman at home and at work, with subsequent guilt when realistic constraints limit her effectiveness in all spheres. Thus, the dual-role hypothesis (Gove, 1972) that married men receive satisfaction from the two roles of husband and career person while married women have only the marriage role as a source of satisfaction, is not sufficient to explain the sex difference in depression. While it remains apparent that marriage is more stressful for women even when, and perhaps because, women are working, specific aspects of family life that account for this have not been identified.

Attempts to ferret through this enigma point out that it is not just the societal fact (for instance--whether or not women are married or whether or not women work) that is relevant to our comprehension of women and emotional distress, but the meanings, perceptions, and situations encountered within these roles that will help to illuminate the connection between the social experience of married women and the psychological experience of depression (Brown and Harris, 1978; Pearlin, 1975). In his analysis of sex roles and depression, Pearlin (1975) concludes that it is the intensity of the conflict involved in integrating the roles of mother, wife, and worker that bear on the married woman's increased vulnerability to depression. He finds that "the women's ego involvement in their work increases the risk of being caught up in maternal conflict...[and that while] it would appear that under some conditions it is not conflictual to be both a worker and a mother, the conflicts are more likely to arise when the woman is invested in both roles" (p. 204).

Since it is likely that the preponderance of emotional distress in married women is related to the fact that it is the women, and not the men who generally have to struggle with conflicts of working and mothering, it is important to look at those women for whom that conflict is likely to be the most salient. Examining full time working women, who are also mothers, can help to illuminate some of the specific conditions of married family life that make it detrimental to the emotional well-being of women (Weissman and Klerman, 1977). Since women who are working for personal, rather than financial reasons, are most likely to invest considerable energy in both work and family spheres, they are most likely to experience a conflict around these roles.

There are two reasons, then, to turn to full-time working married women to enhance our understanding of women and emotional distress. First, while sex role theories of depression have received strong support, these explanations would suggest that it is the traditional role of women in and of itself (defined in varied, and at times, unclear or simplistic ways) that makes women more prone to depressive symptomology. In order to delineate some specific characteristics of women's role within the family, present even when women work, that make women more prone to emotional distress, it is important to look at those women for whom a traditional sex role explanation is obviously insufficient. Second, as Pearlin has explained, married working mothers experience the most intense role conflict between work and family spheres, thus making dimensions of experience that contribute to women's stress prominent for examination. So, it is because these women are nontraditional and because of the conflict they face, that clarification of their stress can contribute to a more

sophisticated analysis of the relation of social experience to the psychological phenomenon of depression.

Examination of dual career couple literature reveals the subtleties of these role conflicts. It becomes clear that it is not just the conflict between occupational roles of husband or wife and family roles, but also a conflict between the occupational role of the husband and the occupational role of the wife (Rapaport and Rapaport, 1972). While it is true that more women are joining the work force outside the home, within these dual career couples, the burden of the conflict remains on the woman. "For the most part the women felt fortunate that they had been able to work out a situation where they had as full a career as they had managed to achieve. They tended to accept as 'inevitable' that the women would have to bear the brunt of child-care and domestic organization, so that there would 'naturally' tend to be more strain on the wife's career-family (role cycling) than on the husband's. The general tendency was to be 'thankful' for small mercies, such as having a husband who did not invite guests home to dinner at the last minute or who did not mind running a vacuum cleaner over the carpets" (Rapaport and Rapaport, 1972, data, 1967, p. 236).

Although working mothers see themselves as better mothers because they work (Poloma, 1970; Birnbaum, 1975), this seems to be essentially a result of their managing the conflict by prioritizing their family demands as most important, job responsibilities as secondary, and by making few demands on their husbands (Poloma, 1970). Poloma (1970) impressively concludes that role conflict in these married working women is not widespread or severe. But this seems to be no wonder since all the wives included in

his study share their husband's ideas of household management--that if a compromise is needed, the wife adjusts, and that mothering is the most important role for women. These women are satisfied putting their families first, earning less money, and taking more responsibility than their husbands. Couples describe difficulties as arising when the husband is not the primary beardwinner, the wife is uncertain about her family role, or the husband withdraws support, making it no surprise that none of the women surveyed wanted to earn more money than her husband.

Emerging from this material on dual career couples is the indication that depression researchers (Brown and Harris, 1978; Pearlin, 1975) were correct in ascertaining that it is the meaning of the conditions encountered within their roles that make married women more susceptible than their husbands to emotional stress, and not the married role in itself. It grows clearer that it is not enough that women's roles are changing; the conditions encountered in these roles that impact differently on women and men must be explicated and changed. If the differential rates of depression and emotional distress for married men and married women are to be understood in terms of the extra conflicts and responsibilities working married mothers face, it is crucial that there be a shift in research focus. Rather than look solely at the mother and her conflicts, how her mothering and working hurts her children or affects her husband, attention must be paid to the role of the father in dual career marriages with children.

Garland (1970) speaks to this gap in the literature by making explicit the assumption that men and husbands are irrelevant to the world of women, an assumption one might easily draw in reading the research of the past decade (Saflios-Rothschild, 1970). Garland importantly looks at the

man in dual-career couples, a laudable beginning to the claim that both men and women have an impact on managing work and household roles and conflict, and furthermore, have an impact on the greater stress that women experience. Garland attemps to dispel the notion that men are threatened by wives who work and concludes that men will not resent or be emasculated by a high achieving wife. This finding is tempered dramatically, however, by the fact that all the wives in his study earned less than their husbands, did not wnat to be more successful, and placed the family and their husband's career above their own career. Similar are reports that professional married men are accepting their wives working professionally only on a theoretical level (Kaley, 1971). In response to specific questioning, men express pessimism about the married professional women's abilities to cope with home and work roles- There is a discrepancy between men's liberal attitudes on global questions regarding women's work and their traditional attitudes on more applied, specific questions (Steinnam and Fox, 1969). The fact that a married woman works does not necessarily lead to a change from traditional role allocation to egalitarian life styles (Szinovacz, 1977).

Thus, while women have absorbed and suffered from the burden of managing career and family, it is clear that it is not simply a woman's problem. It will not be possible for women to achieve equality in this society, even as members of dual-career couples, until "husbands as well as wives redefine the marital role relationship so as to give explicit recognition to the interconnectedness of domestic and occupational roles... It will depend on men having an attitude more supportive than 'it's all right so long as it doesn't affect me'" (Rapaport and Rapaport, 1972,

p. 240). Systematic attention to the relationship between married husbands and wives career and family orientation, demonstrates that "a husband's mode of integrating family and work in his own life is crucial for the success--at least in terms of marital satisfaction--of any attempt of his wife to include a career in her life" (Bailyn, 1970, p. 108). Consistent with this is the finding that women are less likely to describe their marriages as unhappy if they view their husbands as participating in household duties or family decisions (Szinovacz, 1977). "Women have been valuing and supporting men as both husband and provider for centuries; it's nothing new for them. But, for many men, supporting one's wife in the dual role of wife and career person is something that has to be learned" (Hall and Hall, 1979, p. 56). It is not enough for husbands to allow their wives to work: emotional and practical support to women's changing roles is imperative.

There is evidence, then, to indicate that exploration of both the husband's and the wife's roles in work and family spheres, and the relationship of these to mental health, is essential to an understanding of married women's greater susceptibility to depression. Research must be designed to investigate the relationship of family and work roles, as well as aspects of household management and child care in dual-career couples, to depression and emotional distress. Only if we define the conditions and meanings of women's roles within the family, and their husbands' support of them, can we transcend a view of emotional distress that solely emphasizes a woman's internal conflict.

While I have spoken only of heterosexual married couples, we can add to our understanding of married women's emotional distress by exploring less traditional unmarried couples, both heterosexual and lesbian. If

division of labor inside and outside the home varies in these couples so as to decrease women's experience of distress, then we can clarify specific dimensions of family life that have been more stressful for women than for men. In order to keep pace with the shifting roles of women in our society, and to diminish the price that women have paid for these changes, researchers must carefully and explicitly examine the connections between the social experience of women and their psychological experience of depression.

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